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Paradoxes of awareness raising in development: gender and sexual morality in anti-FGC campaigning in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses cultural translations of international campaigns against Female Genital Cutting (FGC) through a critical ethnographic study. It analyses development initiatives as cultural practices and signifying processes. The vernacularisation of these campaigns leads to certain paradoxes: while the abandonment of FGC is encouraged, nationalist-modernist processes of Othering and dominant gender and sexual moralities are also reinforced. These paradoxes reveal how certain aspects of transnational development discourse are easily transmitted while others are subverted. Individual rights discourse fades to the background in favour of putting emphasis on common social concerns and shared gender-conservative norms. FGC as an external bodily practice and a means to control sexual behaviour is rejected in favour of internal moral self-disciplining. Secondly, the transnational fight against FGC is translated into a fight for marriage. The practice is condemned for causing sexual dissatisfaction and friction within the marital bond. Local development workers aim to connect to women's life worlds through reference to dominant social anxieties - family unity, social cohesion and gender-conservative sexuality norms but, importantly, fail to address women's lived experience and knowledge. When international scripts and hegemonic social norms are foregrounded, a body affirmative discussion of female lived sexuality and actual sexual coping strategies is precluded.

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Introduction

Sexual health and representations of gender and sexuality in the field of development work have begun to receive more attention in recent years. These themes have been discussed in relation to the body, reproductive health and rights, and gender mainstreaming practices (e.g. Harcourt 2009; Pearson 2005; Cornwall, Corrêa and Jolly 2008;

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Groes-Green 2009; Jolly, Cornwall and Hawkins 2013). This article builds on this critical development scholarship and insights from postcolonial theory and the anthropology of development to highlight the productive role of discourse in shaping women's understandings and experiences of sexuality and bodily practices.

In particular, it looks at representations of gender and sexuality and points to the importance of also considering family values and family ideology in future analysis and in development practice. Gender and sexuality norms are hard to separate from family norms, whether they are ideal conceptions or lived realities. Family relations have traditionally received good attention in Middle East scholarship (e.g. Joseph 1999; McLarney 2015; Inhorn 1996; Hasso 2011; Cuno 2015; Abu-Lughod 1998), but the role of the family and larger social structures is somewhat overlooked in development work and studies. An important exception is Kamran Asdar Ali's work on family planning in Egypt. Ali analysed these programmes as examples of development that aim to create new, modern subjectivities by introducing changes in the intimate sphere of domesticity, child-rearing and gender and sexuality norms (Ali 2002). I have been interested in a similar way in understanding how anti-FGC campaigning intervenes in existing social and cultural norms of gender and sexuality.

FGC in Egypt has been studied from a social anthropological angle that situates FGC within wider practices that give meaning to womanhood and femininity (Malmström 2005) and that place FGC in relation to a discussion of the use of the terminology of harmful cultural practices (Malmström 2013; Malmström and Van Raemdonck 2015). It has been argued that international discourse influences how women perceive themselves, their bodies and their sexuality. A discourse that emphasises irreversible physical harm and represents cut women's bodies as destroyed, naturally affects these women's self-perceptions. Indeed, the emphasis among international campaigners on reproductive health hazards and claims of sexual dysfunction has already been subject to much debate (Makhlouf Obermeyer 2005; Boyden 2012; Ahmadu and Shweder 2009; Johnsdotter 2018; Esho et al. 2010)[1]. This paper aims to complement this work by examining transnational campaigning discourse ethnographically with a focus on awareness raising activities. It demonstrates how discourse becomes vernacularised, rehearsed and transmitted to society at large, while, importantly, failing to engage with women's actual experience, knowledge and sexual coping strategies.

The term vernacularisation was coined by anthropologist Sally Merry to explain cultural translations of rights discourse in the frame of activism and projects of violence against women in Hawai (Merry 2001, 2006): "As ideas from transnational sources travel to small communities, they are typically vernacularised, or adapted to local institutions and meanings" (Merry 2006, 39). Many have found this a helpful concept to look at global-local dynamics concerning human rights and women's rights. Merry and Levitt ask how different global 'values packages' circulate and get appropriated by different actors across the world, particularly 'global women's rights packages' (Levitt and Merry 2009, 446-7). Their focus lies on what we can learn from the efforts of vernacularisers (activists, NGOs, institutions, and so on) to present this package to local audiences in intelligible and acceptable terms. These actors are seen as in-between figures, connecting the global community (such as the stage of the United Nations)

with local audiences. Because they navigate both levels simultaneously they allow us to study the intricacies of cultural translation. This helps us to understand the contextual specificities that resonate with the message that the translators seek to convey. My interest equally lies in knowing to which local social-cultural understandings a vernacullariser searches to connect. How in particular is transnational discourse against FGC – embedded in rights-based language - transmitted and re-appropriated within the Egyptian context?

Occupying an in-between position as cultural translator also includes the possibility of subversion of original thought and principles. Levitt and Merry note that not only does the language of rights often entirely disappear, they point to the risk of 'hijacking concepts of human and women's rights for different purposes' (ibid. 448). It is the nature of such 'hijacking' moves that I wish to explore in more depth and enquire about the context and reasons behind them, while referring to them as paradoxes. Anthropologist Sealing Cheng has similarly shown the paradoxes at work in the vernacularisation of women's rights discourse in the context of anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking policies in South Korea (Cheng 2011). She notes how support of transnational rights discourse led to a strengthening of ideas of 'cultural authenticity' and 'nationhood'. Such paradoxes are not unique to the contexts of South Korea, or Egypt, but are likely to appear in many places where transnational discourses permeate societies and change the local terms of debate.

In addition, critical development and NGO studies scholars have been looking at flows of knowledge between the transnational sphere (especially women's rights advocacy) and local environments. Although many do not directly engage with the concept of vernacularisation, they equally examine transnational feminism and its instruments (Hemment 2014; Alvarez 2014; Hodzic 2014; Costa 2014). Through a lens that is critical of global inequalities and postcolonial power relations, they reassess critiques of NGOisation and aim to move beyond them. They share a concern to understand how cultural translations in and through NGOs operate and play out dynamically in society.

My work in this paper is set against the background of these different trends of scholarship revolving around the vernacularisation of women's rights-based discourse and transnational feminism and NGO work in the Middle East. I conducted ethnographic research in a series of eleven awareness raising seminars that I attended in Cairo and Luxor between 2013-2014. Campaigning discourse travels between different levels – from the transnational to the local – and passes through different layers of educational activity, starting with the composition of training materials, through training-of-trainers' classes, until the receiving end of beneficiaries, the participants of projects. Different processes of translation occur during these movements.

The central argument is that the vernacularisation of these campaigns leads to certain paradoxes: while the abandonment of FGC is encouraged, nationalist-modernist processes of Othering and dominant gender and sexual moralities and are also reinforced. This means that certain aspects of development discourse are easily transmitted while others are subverted. The dichotomy in development discourse between traditional and modern is often vernacularised in the Egyptian context through the creative reinforcement of Upper Egypt - the *sa'id* - (the geographical region of South-Egypt) as a mythical space that represents the 'internal Other'. By calling on women's

desire to be part of 'the group of modern nations', they are urged and invited to abandon FGC practices. On the other hand, international declarations locate anti-FGC campaigning within a rights-based discourse and a language of violence against women. In the vernacularisation of campaigning such conceptual frames almost disappear. Instead of emphasising individual harm and rights, a relational approach situates women in the family and the wider community. It reaffirms dominant gender-conservative sexual moralities and fails to engage with women's lived realities, already existing knowledge and coping strategies.

Finally, it is worth investigating how rights-based discourse travels and connects in places and ways that were not immediately imagined nor intended by its supporters. These questions are highly relevant against the backdrop of larger debate on the crisis of humanitarianism and human rights in its contemporary form of institutionalisation (Hopgood 2013; Fassin 2013; Moyn 2014; Fassin and Gomme 2012). Anthropological and ethnographic work on the vernacularisation of rights-based activism and development work can contribute to these debates by shedding more light on otherwise neglected perspectives. I begin with a short historical and political context to anti-FGC activism and campaigning. Afterwards, I will elaborate on the methods used and discuss my findings.

Anti-FGC discourse in Egypt: from grassroots feminist activism to state-led strategies

FGC in contemporary Egypt has become known among global anti-FGC campaigners and development workers for several reasons. The country is known for historically having a very high prevalence rate, in 2016, 93% of all ever-married women aged 15 to 49 years were reported to have undergone the practice[2]. The predominant type of FGC performed in Egypt corresponds to type I, as defined by WHO[3]. Egypt is also known for having rapidly declining rates compared to other practising countries. However, this decline is accompanied by rising medicalisation, which means that the surgery is increasingly being done by medically trained professionals. According to the 2014 Egyptian Demographic and Health Surveys (EDHS), overall medicalisation (accounting for all circumcised women aged 15-49) rose from 17% in 1995 to 38% in 2014. It is clear from these numbers and reports that – following two decades of campaigning - the youngest generations are mainly undergoing FGC by doctors or nurses. Of the 0-19 age group, 82% of all performed circumcisions were done by a medical professional (El-Zanaty and Associates 2015, 191).

Debate on medical FGC is not new. In the 1950s Egyptian doctors discussed the possibility of there being a medical need for FGC when parts of the female genitalia were deemed too large (Wassef, 1998). Some combined this medically based discussion with religious arguments. Then and today, the vision that a girl might be in need of genital surgery and that this decision is best left to a medical professional finds support from both medical and religious authorities. It resonates with a particular Islamic understanding of FGC that advocate carefulness and moderation in cutting. Transnational campaigns emphasise medical knowledge and simultaneously rely on religious authorities who speak out against the practice. This has unintendedly

strengthened this intertwined medical/religious point of view. While official campaign discourse argues that FGC is not Islamic, popular understanding and practice over the last two decades have mediated and translated this information by strengthening the old advice within Islamic tradition to cut carefully and moderately[4].

Some activists have suggested that underlying gender and sexuality norms need to be addressed as part of campaigning efforts (BBC 2016). In this respect, it should be noted that activists in the 1990s did address FGC as a practice embedded in other gender practices and norms. Their anti-FGC activism was part of a larger analysis and social critique. The Egyptian state embraced activism against FGC and recruited staff in the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood to develop national plans for the eradication of FGM in 2000. At that point, feminist and grassroots activism weakened, to be replaced by official state plans that targeted FGC more pragmatically. Current campaigning is therefore characterised by a pragmatic and goal-oriented approach toward the abandonment of FGC.

An ethnography of awareness raising

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Cairo and Luxor between November 2013 and January 2014 as part of a doctoral research project on religious and secular discourses on FGC in contemporary Egypt[5]. I attended a series of eleven awareness raising seminars funded, organised and coordinated by the Coalition of NGOs against FGM that allowed me to sit in on their meetings and record what was being said. Each seminar lasted between thirty minutes and one hour and was attended by fifteen to thirty local women. Each seminar took place at a different location and was hosted by a different local small NGO and facilitated by a different trainer. Two meetings consisted of an invited talk by a local *shaykh* – all of them graduates of al-Azhar University. Most of the seminars were held in the northern outskirts of Cairo. Three were held in southern Egypt, in villages surrounding the city of Luxor. These were organised independently from the Coalition of NGOs, one was organised by a local organisation of which one of my fieldwork contacts was a member and two others were organised by volunteers from the Coptic Church. All seminars, interviews and informal talks were conducted in Egyptian colloquial Arabic. Recordings were transcribed into (Arabic) text by an Egyptian research assistant hired to transcribe and were then coded by me.

Although my role was reduced to observing the seminars, the boundaries between participation and observation were of course fluid. As a white woman in my early thirties, I was easily perceived as part of the NGO-team, sharing in the aim of raising consciousness toward the abandonment of the practice. Presenting myself as a researcher and observer, I felt the desire to differentiate myself from activists or NGO/donor representatives. My worry was that 'authenticity' would get lost in the interactions in the seminars, or that 'real' feelings and opinions would become filtered in my interlocutors' responses. This preoccupation faded over the course of the seminars. I understood that decades of campaigning in combination with Islamic responses had led to the politicisation of FGC in the public sphere and had established certain normative patterns of discussion. The main arguments in favour and against are well-known and

this was reflected in the seminars and by my interlocutors. The potential symbolic weight of my presence as a European researcher seemed unlikely to affect individuals' ongoing processing of received information. Moreover, a quest for 'authentic' voices in such a politicised context of cultural/religious debate proved quite illusory. In such a setting, women and men indeed "strategically merge their voices with those of more powerful others" (Walley 1997, 338). Certain arguments and discourses become publicly established to provide the discursive contours of debate. In the following analysis, therefore, I focus on patterns of highly recurrent discourse encountered across regional differences.

The politics of morality: raising 'good girls'

Awareness raising activities are strongly invested in delegitimising commonly held ideas about FGC in order to persuade women to abandon the practice. One of the most important rationales in Egypt for performing FGC is to reduce female sexual desire. It may be believed, for example, that women possess excessive sexual desire or that the physical shape and size of the female genitalia need to be reduced to prevent friction and arousal. According to this set of beliefs, circumcising girls prevents them from being tempted into entering pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relationships. Education campaigning efforts seek to address these commonly held perceptions. Trainers argue that FGC does not affect sexual desire but that it does harm women's ability of sexual enjoyment. They attempt to disconnect FGC from sexual norms and morality by drawing a crucial distinction between the effects of circumcision on 1) sexual desire on the one hand and 2) sexual enjoyment on the other. The training-of-trainers course material created and taught by the Coalition of NGOs against FGM explains this as follows:

> Circumcision does not affect female sexual desire, circumcised women have similar sexual desire to non-circumcised women as long as her mind and senses are sound. The brain is the sole organ in the female body that is responsible of governing sexual desire and behaviour, whether that [behaviour] is right or wrong. Partial or complete cutting of external female genitalia cannot control her behaviour. Education of the mind and its cultivation through religious education, human morals and correct scientific knowledge is the sole guarantee for the right female behaviour before and after marriage (Coalition of NGOs against FGM, 2013).

The text seeks to refute some of the underlying motivations for FGC and instead proposes a different way of shaping social and sexual behaviour. By locating female (and male) desire in the brain and therefore disconnecting it from the genital area, a shift of focus takes place from the genitals to the brain, or from the body/exterior to the mind/interior. The text maintains that morally proper sexual conduct is still desired, but one should no longer rely on physical operations such as FGC to ensure adherence to a normative sexual morality.

Trainers use this received information and put it into practice in the seminars. In order to deliver this message, they aim to connect to women's concerns by relying on the trope of the 'good girl' (*bint kwayyisa*). The notion of the 'good girl' is embedded in dominant gender norms and was central to virtually all seminars. It relates directly to girls' sexual morality and the dominant norm of virginity. The centrality of chastity

and virginity in Egyptian moral cultures is long standing and well-documented (e.g. Antoun 1968; Inhorn 1996; Abu Odeh 2010). A good girl or a good woman is considered well-raised and is respectful of the values that underscore women's modest behaviour towards men.

Trainers promote the spheres of upbringing and education as the main sites for shaping women's moral behaviour as an alternative to performing FGC. In a small NGO in an informal settlement just across the border from the Cairo governorate in the Qalyubiyya governorate, I observed Eva, a young Coptic woman, talking to a group of about twenty, mainly Muslim, women. The room was very noisy, and children kept distracting their mothers who tried to listen to her words. Many of them had already heard similar talks in the past three to four years, and this was already Eva's second time in this NGO. She refuted FGC as a practice that keeps girls 'walking on the right path' and ensures their morally and sexually correct behaviour:

> Eva: The subject goes back to education, how have you raised your daughter? There is no relation to whether you have circumcised her or not. Have you raised her on values and principles at home? Of those who are in prostitution houses, 99,9% of these women are circumcised. And there are women who are not circumcised but who are married and living a happy life.

Here Eva, just as some other trainers, refers to the example of sex workers to underscore the importance of upbringing in maintaining normative sexual morals. FGC does not affect women's desire and behaviour, only education does, she argues. Raising girls properly means instilling values of modesty as an alternative to performing FGC. Towards the end of the meeting Eva invoked both Christian and Muslim discourse to strengthen her argument. 'One is held accountable before God as to how one raises their children', after which a Muslim woman immediately completed her thought by mentioning a *hadith* expressing the same idea. She succeeded in driving home the feeling of sharing common gender and sexuality norms across religious boundaries. Values of female modesty and virginity are acquired through upbringing, religious education and exemplary behaviour by parents.

On another occasion, also in Qalyubiyya, Nihad, a slender Coptic woman in her forties, captured her audience with an inspiring and enthusiastic talk. Here, I had been told that the district is predominantly inhabited by Muslims and that political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood are especially popular. After the talk, Nihad asked me with a sense of pride whether I had noticed how she had responded to someone who had come out as a supporter of the Brotherhood, and who was not yet convinced to abandon FGC. She was happy to have been able to 'quieten her'. She did this by appealing to shared Muslim and Christian moral sentiments and discourses:

> Nihad: Let's think about this further. If I raise my daughter in fear of the Qurʾan, and I make her memorise the Qurʾan [or] I made her memorise the Gospel and she is always in church [or] in the mosque. She sees her father look at me, she sees that her mother never lies. She sees that her father never does anything wrong and she understands what is right and what is wrong. Do you expect that my daughter will then do something wrong?
>
> Women: No.

Children learn from parents' behaviour and will imitate them. To embody and practice exemplary behaviour as parents is how to offer the best education to your

daughter, she argues. The terms religious education and good education are used interchangeably, as these values are viewed as overall Egyptian concerns and are seen as truly national values.

The fight against FGC translated into a fight for marriage

Campaigning discourse argues that FGC does not curb sexual desire because desire originates in the brain. Proper female sexual conduct is ensured by instilling modest values through upbringing and moral self-discipline. Beyond this, however, trainers argue that FGC is harmful to sexual enjoyment. Women (and men) suffer harm if they no longer experience sensation and are therefore not able to experience sexual pleasure.

In a packed room in an isolated settlement on the North-Eastern outskirts of Cairo governorate, Sherine addressed about thirty Muslim and Christian women sitting around the room and leaning against the walls. Although for many it is not the first time to hear about this topic, the atmosphere is animated. Most of the women populating Cairo's outskirt settlements are recent immigrants from Southern Egypt. This local NGO is Coptic and also forms part of the umbrella organisation, Coalition of NGOs against FGM. Sherine explained this in the following way:

> Concerning frigidity and so. So, after I have received the message from my brain, what is getting started? My feelings are mobilised. After this, when the woman responds to this together with the man, then this part [the genitals that are cut] is needed, this part is the end not the beginning. We need this part at the end of the sexual relation, but the brain is what makes the woman use her genitals. So, what happens when this [other] part is taken away?

Here, the brain as the source of desire is differentiated from the body and genitalia as responding to the brain's signals. The consequences of not having proper bodily functions affects both women and men, Sherine argues:

> The husband wants someone who is responsive to him and active but instead he finds a woman who acts as cold as ice. So, he finds that he doesn't feel what … ? That he doesn't feel enjoyment. So, either he resorts to drugs, or he marries another woman, those men will get married again and you'll find yourselves as second wives.

These final sentences were added half-jokingly, half-seriously and they were received similarly with some grumbles and some giggles by attending women. Here, the speaker tried to connect to the life worlds, desires and fears of the women by tapping into certain predominant cultural tropes. Men's drug use, their unfaithfulness, their not finding sexual satisfaction and the problems this causes are important social concerns. The excerpt illustrates well how women's loss of sexual sensation due to FGC is often represented from an exclusively male perspective and is framed within the social institution of marriage. The point of departure is the husband's sexual desires, his frustrations and his possible decision to marry someone else. FGC is conceptualised as harmful for sexual relations between spouses and therefore for the marital bond. Women's lack of feeling and lack of sexual sensation leads to misunderstanding, unhappiness and possibly – or quite likely - problems within marriage, it is argued. This in turn may lead to divorce or drive husbands to look for other (polygamous) arrangements.

A clear link is thus established in vernacularised trainers' discourse between having undergone FGC and experiencing problems in sexual and marital relations.

Importantly, this discursive link has found its way outside of the awareness raising sessions to society at large. Today, FGC is perceived as one of the main reasons behind broken up relations. This perception influences how young people started to make sense of sexual troubles and how they interpret personal experiences. A young man in his twenties working in the tourist sector in Luxor and living in a village nearby the city, explained to me the following:

> Everybody knows this now. Sexual frigidity (*al-burud al-gensy*) in women occurs because of circumcision (*khitan*). I did not believe this until one of my friends told me his personal story. He had been married but when he slept with his wife she did not feel anything, nor did she have any desire. He told me that it was as if you were sleeping with a mattress. He divorced her after one week (Rafiq).

In the vernacularisation of anti-FGC discourse, the fight against FGC has therefore become translated into a fight for marriage. Marriage and marital problems have become the means by which Egyptian trainers approach the harmful consequences of FGC. Conjuring up the social ideal of a happy and sexually satisfying marriage connects to existing social concerns. The institution of marriage is thought to be in national crisis in the light of high and rising divorce rates in Egypt in recent decades[6]. Such concern is also in line with religious-conservative voices that stress the importance of the family unit for social peace and cohesion. These voices portray a sound family unit as the cornerstone of the nation. Broken marriages and split families are thereby seen as endangering the security and strength of the nation as a whole (McLarney 2015; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989).

However, embedding anti-FGC discourse in unsatisfying sexual relations and broken marriages also discursively victimises and blames women. Women who have been cut are thereby portrayed as the unmistakable victims of their condition, their ability to enjoy sex represented as destroyed. The seminars I attended did not allow for discursive space in which to imagine potential changes toward healing or growing intimacy between sexual partners. There was no opportunity for women to describe how they have been coping with these forms of embodied knowledge. Women's own sexual knowledge and experiences were neglected because of the meetings' focus on transmitting new 'awareness'. I have called this earlier a consequence of the nature of 'international scripts' – common in the field of gender and development – that do not encourage a departure from the real-life situation of women (Roodsaz and Van Raemdonck, 2018). Departing from women's actual lived experience, (sexual) trials, failures and successes would necessarily centre the women themselves rather than socially dominant gender and sexuality norms. Instead, seminars are highly scripted as they are meant to serve the goal of dissuading women from FGC. Considering FGC within wider gender and sexuality norms, as did the early grassroots activists of the 1990s, is no longer acceptable. In the contemporary vernacularisation of campaigning discourse, dominant female sexual morality is reinforced and emphasised as a national, uniting value.

Development and its 'internal other'

Campaigning efforts to sever the tie between FGC and religion, particularly Islam, have led to an emphasis on the cultural aspects. The practice has been relegated to

an outdated cultural realm that Egyptians have inherited from previous generations, being part of Egypt's *'adat wa taqalid*, customs and habits. By so doing, it is placed in a different time frame but also in a different space. The origins of the practice are usually traced back to the African continent, particularly Sudan. Here, the so-called 'hard and ugly' type of FGC (in the form of infibulation) is often performed.

This re-location of FGC to the past and to the South instead of the here and now forms a strategy to create a cultural distance from and an aversion to the practice. The South of the Egypt plays a significant role in this symbolic distancing. Geographically bordering Sudan, Upper Egypt or the *sa'id*, is usually described as the place where FGC is mainly performed. When speaking broadly on the subject of FGC in Egypt, most of my interlocutors and virtually all the trainers in seminars immediately associated the practice with the *sa'id* and mentioned poverty and illiteracy as explanatory factors[7]. Although statistics have documented that FGC is widespread across the country and wealth appears as the most relevant parameter, the *sa'id* continues to play a role as the foremost site where 'backwardness prevails' and development is needed. Popular cultural traditions such as superstition, illiteracy and irrationality fit easily with the prevailing stereotypes concerning the region. In one seminar, Sherine aimed to drive the message home that religion is irrelevant, and that FGC needs to be fought against as a 'hard' traditional practice shared by all Egyptians, regardless of their religious affiliation.

> I will tell you something that happened in the *sa'id*. It's about some woman who was not circumcised while everyone knew this. They scandalised her while she was walking but she was a courageous girl (*hiya bint tala'it gad'a*) and she stopped in front of them. Come and see this village, I tell you, now 99 percent do no longer circumcise their daughters. We have to stop and stand in front of those who say that you have to cut. Don't let anyone influence you, don't let your mother-in-law influence you.

Importantly, Upper Egypt is here represented as a place with the worst conditions imaginable and at the same time where the greatest change can be achieved. The attitude of the girl in the anecdote is praised as courageous for being able to bring about change. In a place that is presumed to be strongly resistant to social change, she serves as a model to be emulated by all other women, especially in easier places such as Cairo. Catherine Miller argued earlier that, "[t]he *sa'id*, as an 'internal other', came to play a fundamental symbolic role in the Egyptian society, a role that was historically endorsed by the rural areas or the Bedouins in contrast to the Cairene urban society" (Miller 2004, 25). In the series of seminars, I attended, *sa'idis* (people from the South) are important figures who serve as an internal Other that embodies the features that modern Cairenes prefer not to possess.

Nation, science and progress

Vernacularised discourse to abandon FGC is also highly indebted to narratives of development and scientific knowledge linked to the ideas of nation and national progress. In Sherine's words 'Now we have education, in the past we had ignorance (*jahiliyya*)', referring simultaneously to secular and Islamic epistemological frameworks. Ayman, a Muslim trainer in a local NGO in a working-class district in central Cairo, also

stressed the importance of increased knowledge. He leads a small NGO together with his wife and comes across as having the characteristic spirit and energy of a small entrepreneur. Dressed in a three-piece suit, he addressed the women attending the session and said that increased scientific knowledge is connected to the need for societal change. For him, all individuals share a civil responsibility to bring about that change: 'We do not only raise awareness among the mothers who are sitting here today, you will go home and then raise awareness among your neighbours'.

He reported feeling bolstered by campaigning against FGC as a global norm. Established by international declarations and promoted by UN agencies, the international community has decided against FGC. As mentioned earlier, my own physical presence was sometimes used as an illustration of this global norm and an endorsement of its claims. On one occasion, Ayman decided to make use of my presence in his talk:

> We welcome An and Mr. Abdel Aziz [representative of the Coalition of NGOs against FGM]. (…) Today there are [also] people travelling thousands of miles to raise our awareness. (…) The goal is the protection of Egyptian women and the fight against violence against Egyptian women and children. These people come to us and say, 'we want to protect Egyptian women' (*ihna 'ayzin nihafiz 'ala l-marʿa al-masriyya*) whose rights are in vain from the moment she is born until she marries.

The Coalition of NGOs and I were considered representatives of the more 'advanced states' who possess better knowledge and travel to Egypt to spread that knowledge. Increased knowledge and global support against FGC combine together in a language of modernisation and a progress-oriented vision of society and culture. Trainers appeal to women's desire to be modern and to be among the group of states that are considered advanced and not backward. Women beneficiaries who had earlier listened to Sherine's talk told me on another occasion that 'the West has medical opportunities (*imkaniyat sahhiyya*) and their countries have strong economies, and this is why they are devoting attention to topics as these [FGC]' (11-1-2014). Abandoning FGC thereby becomes part of 'the politics of national progress' and the pursuit of the goal of modernity as 'exemplified by the "West"' (Asad 2003, 15). The nation-state leads this process and states can be ranked hierarchically on the map of modernity. Such an understanding resonates with dominant development/modernisation discourse in which 'tradition' and 'culture' are the only obstacles on the long road to growth, and are ultimately 'to blame for their socioeconomic backwardness' (Kapoor 2008, 20).

Conclusion

This ethnographic study of vernacularisation within awareness raising campaigns against FGC reveals a paradox: while aiming to persuade women to stop FGC, underlying dominant norms of gender, sexuality and family are reinforced and nationalist-modernist processes of Othering/racialising are reproduced. The paradox then seems more of a delicate balancing act, or bargain, that allows "modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalisation and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies" (Appadurai 1996, 10). Abandoning FGC as a concession to international pressure has been traded for a reaffirmation of gender and sexual morality, values that are expressed as transcending religious boundaries and articulating a

common Egyptian-ness. Crucially, rights-based discourses are locally appropriated and vernacularised in ways that were not intended (Cheng 2011). To advance messages against FGC, trainers connect to common social anxieties including tropes of male drug use, sexual dissatisfaction, female frigidity and the threat of divorce. They address women in their relationality to others - children, husbands, society - rather than as individuals possessing rights. In this way, they advance the role of family ideology, relational perspectives on the individual, and a preoccupation with social cohesion and cultural preservation.

Beyond this, internationally circulating discourse on sexual dysfunction (i.e. the notion that cut women are irrevocably sexually harmed and unable to enjoy sexual pleasure) is also locally reproduced, closing the space for a more body affirmative discussion of lived sexuality and real-life sexual coping strategies. Through these and other means, hegemonic discourses take centre stage while women's actual lives and experiences are de-centred. When women's own, already existing, knowledge of the self, their bodies and their sexuality is obliterated in order to raise awareness on the basis of international scripts, then initiatives fail in their efforts to 'empower' women. Here, I join earlier critiques by feminist and postcolonial development scholars who deplored the loss of the radical potential behind ideas of women's empowerment and the incorporation of gender equality within a neoliberal economic agenda (e.g. Cornwall and Rivas 2015). A more thorough decolonising detachment from the logics of the development industry is needed, I believe, to effectively enable transformative encounters and dialogue. Such interaction must rely on and embrace women's diverse subjectivities rather than casting them aside, suspending them or wanting to alter them within the goal of uni-directional awareness raising.

Notes

1. A recent literature review article on women's attitudes towards FGC in contexts of migration confirms the importance of dominant discourse on self-perception and body image and consequently on sexual experiences and sexual dysfunction. A strong discourse on 'mutilation' affects women's 'sexual self-esteem, and, as an effect, their sexual function' (Johnsdotter 2018, 19).
2. See UNICEF, Statistical profile on Female Genital Cutting/Mutilation, Egypt Country Profile, https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/country_profiles/Egypt/FGMC_EGY.pdf
3. Type I refers to "Partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the prepuce. In medical literature this form of FGM/C is also referred to as 'clitoridectomy'" (United Nations Children's Fund 2013, 7).
4. This goes back to a saying (*hadith*) attributed to prophet Muhammad, collected in the compilation of Abu Dawud. Muhammad spoke to a woman who used to circumcise girls and told her "cut little and do not overdo because it brings more radiance to the face and it is more pleasant for the husband" (Atighetchi 2007 , 306). Supporters of the practice find legitimation in Muhammad's description of how to practise FGC correctly. Others interpret the saying as implying that the practice existed in the days of Muhammad but that he attempted to reduce its significance to a minimal procedure instead of prohibiting it in a straightforward way (Abu-Sahlieh 2001, 112-3).
5. My previous education in Middle Eastern Studies, my Arabic language skills and employment by Egyptian development NGOs allowed me to conduct fieldwork independently. During the project, I was fully funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and was no longer an employee of any NGO.

6. According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), divorce rates have been rising spectacularly over the last decades. In 2015, the divorce rate had increased by 83 percent compared to 1996. CAPMAS' more recent reports identify a 10.8 percent increase in divorce in 2015 compared to the previous year (Masriya 2016).
7. Statistics show that the difference in prevalence between Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt (the Northern Provinces also known as the Delta region) is not as radical as is commonly understood. According to the 2014 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), the difference is even negligible. The report indicates a prevalence rate of FGC among ever-married women between 19 and 45 for Upper Egypt of 95% and for Lower Egypt of 92% (El-Zanaty and Associates 2015, 186). The highest differences in prevalence are marked by the urban-rural parameter and most of all by the level of wealth.

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